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Hanging Tough on Star Wars

Ronald Reagan's famed political intuition and less celebrated managerial talent were confirmed during a break in the tough Geneva bargaining sessions when an impatient foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko growled to Secretary of State George Shultz, "I've already heard that half of ten times [Russian for half a dozen]."

Shultz had just explained Reagan's insistence on continuing research for Star Wars—the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). "All right," Shultz replied, "if you want, I'll explain it to you a sixth and a seventh and an eighth time." Such persistence in pressing a much ridiculed program ("The Star Wars phrase has hurt us," the president told a private briefing of congressmen the week before Geneva) with Shultz fully in support constituted Reagan's triumph at Geneva.

Without the strategic defense concept to put fear into the Soviet heart, and steel into the U.S. spine, Gromyko probably would not have gone to Geneva. Or, once there, he would not have agreed to offer up on the bargaining table the huge Soviet advantage in hard-target, counterforce ICBMs.

Vague on facts and ignorant of arms control history, the president nevertheless perceived that the U.S. desperately needed a credible counter to awesome Soviet offensive nuclear power. That delivered the Soviets to the negotiating table they swore they had abandoned.

While sticking to Star Wars in the face of ridicule, Reagan enforced an unusual degree of discipline on all key players. The tone was set in a New Year's Day meeting at Walter Annenberg's desert mansion in Palm Springs and the chief enforcer was self-effacing, soft-spoken Robert McFarlane, the president's national security adviser.

McFarlane has formed a close bond with Paul Nitze, Shultz's special arms control adviser who has helped convince him of SDI's value. At Palm Springs, McFarlane wrung agreement on a tightly worded 16-page presidential instruction limiting maneuver room for the Shultz-led American delegation. Those instructions were then initialed back here by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the CIA's William Casey.

Shultz was instructed not to trade any particle of Star Wars research for hints of major Soviet concessions in its dangerous armory of counterforce weapons (ICBMs aimed at American silos and bomber fields). Far more difficult, Shultz must get a Soviet commitment to put its own rapidly growing, land-based defensive systems (ABM) on the table: otherwise, the United States would propose a long Geneva adjournment to give Moscow time to change its mind.

Toward the end of the last session at Geneva, Gromyko was hanging tough against the ABM demand. Shultz thereupon asked for a recess and went to the room next door to give his colleagues the bad news. No member of the American delegation suggested that the United States should tone down its demand to avoid a politically damaging failure.

When Shultz returned with his position unchanged, Gromyko yielded. The Soviet imperative of trying to find ways to examine and dilute Reagan's Star Wars program overrode the Kremlin's desire to hide its own many-sided defensive systems.

Thus was Reagan's political intuition vindicated in this first breakthrough round of the new U.S.-Soviet arms talks. The victory is small compared to what lies ahead. Thwarted in their original negotiating offer limiting talks solely to Star Wars, the Soviets have many poisoned arrows in their quiver. For example, a call for a moratorium on new medium-range missiles in Europe would have to be rejected by Reagan, regenerating anti-nuclear activists here and in Western Europe.

The U.S. response to such Soviet maneuvers may be less fractured than previously. Hitherto feuding, State and Defense Department arms control specialists are in a state of truce. Shultz has shown a new openness to Assistant Defense Secretary Richard Perle and other hard-liners. Perle, the State Department's hair-shirt these past four years, praised Shultz on the return flight from Geneva for having handled the delegation as a "team."

Will this new cordiality persist? Certainly in nothing like its immediate post-Geneva warmth. But if the key players give the president's intuition free rein, the new round of talks might conceivably produce a good result or two. That's not the utopian dream of devotees of arms control for its own sake, but it might be more than the disappointing and dangerous harvest of the past 15 years.